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A Mouthful To Chew

This week, the Senate Intelligence Committee was handed more than just a series of new allegations involving the Central Intelligence Agency.

Former CIA agent John Stockwell's charges of illegal CIA operations in Angola also represent the first major, public test of the Senate committee's CIA watchdog power and gumption. And how the committee handles this challenge should determine if it is really an effective watchdog or just another in a long series of paper tigers.

With no small amount of irony, Stockwell's charges of illegal, clandestine operations by the CIA in Angola in 1975 cover the same time period that helped give birth later to the new, and supposedly more effective, Senate Intelligence Committee, whose membership includes Vermont Sen. Robert T. Stafford.

It was during 1975 and 1976 that Senate hearings on earlier CIA abuses were being conducted, eventually spurring the Senate to set up a new CIA oversight system. Yet Stockwell, the former chief of the CIA's Angolan task force and one of many CIA agents who resigned from the agency in 1977, has now charged that the CIA was still saying one thing and doing another even as Senate hearings on CIA assassination plots were under way and the Ford Administration was denying direct U.S. involvement in the Angolan civil war.

He charges that:

—The CIA was using Americans as military advisors in Angola without the knowledge of the Congress, the Ford White House, or the State Department, and in direct contradiction of the stated Angolan policies of all three.

—Secretly financing efforts around the world to recruit mercenaries to fight for U.S. interests in Angola, again without approval or apparent knowledge of Congress, the CIA oversight group of that period, or the White House.

—So badly handling the clandestine operation that the Soviets and the Cubans felt the need to intervene in the Angolan civil war with their own clandestine means, worsening an already bad situation.

The Senate Intelligence Committee needs to do more here than just investigate the accuracy of these charges, report on them publicly, and make certain that nothing of the kind is still going on. It must also ensure that those who may have been responsible for sanctioning illegal actions in the Angolan operation are brought to trial, and to bring an abrupt halt to government attempts to punish those who "blow the whistle" on illegal clandestine actions more severely than those who perpetrate those actions.

You would think, in fact, that the new leadership of the CIA, Admiral Stansfield Turner & Company, would be as eager as anyone to help the Congress set this sort of example. For what better way to prove that the CIA has gone straight?

Stockwell